

Christmas Eve, 2016

RC: Lior, what’s your work about?

LM: Ooh. My work is about lies.

RC: Lies?

LM: In a fun way, yeah.

RC: Like, deception?

LM: No. I think my work comes from its most immediate surroundings, and the most concrete situations, that I bring into the art. I echo different moments in time, or histories that I am into, that I really enjoy mediating. The work always happens in real time but it also talks with dead people.

RL: Which dead people?

LM: I don’t know... they could be German, they could be from East Europe, they could be French. Usually they are artists. Sometimes they’re writers. Typically, they are dead. I don’t think I speak to anyone who is alive, to be honest.

RL: Who are the dead people you speak to? Do you have examples?

LM: I do, but I don’t want to get into name-dropping.

RL: Ok, so let’s approach this from another direction, how do you get to these dead people?

LM: at some point I was exploring early modernist approaches, and the way they aimed to affect life in a bigger way, and how they also translated this intention into practical approaches and designs, practical visual language, and fashion. Through that I got to the Russians, and these early avant-garde soviet women that were making bathing suits and gym clothing. Through that, I started to feel much more at ease with forms of abstraction. These works became a sort of template for how to fit into the body, a template that creates a relationship between the body and abstraction.

RL: It’s interesting because this “template” also implies movement. There’s something about your work that forces the viewer to move a lot in an attempt to understand what is happening. Your work requires movements, so it’s nice that you’re interested in these artists that were creating swim suits. Like them, you also produce for moving bodies.

LM: It’s funny, when I started making art, I was constantly confounded by how art is such a terrible tool to use; you load it with so much information and stuff you care about and then it dissolves in such a weird way. This transitioned at some point to me realizing what an artwork can do, it can move; your information is still secure, but it’s not so much about that information anymore. My work is the result of this information failure. I want the artwork to change as you spend time with it.

RC: When you say the art work constantly moves, I interpret that one way, you might be interpreting that another way. Can you clarify that a little bit? For me, I think about it as in transition between hanging and storage; the floor, the walls, the storage. When you say that, what do you mean?

LM: What I mean is that you can’t absorb the work as a single image. There are various interpretations happening at the same time, you can’t really hold them all without some of them disappearing. It’s less about the artwork being an object and more about the artwork being a habitat for different interpretations, or different ideas, moves, and marks.

RC: When you’re referencing early modernism, you are referencing a revolutionary movement, whereas your work feels kind of quiet with regards to any sort of desire for change.

LM: It’s not only about the revolutionary movement, but also about the leftovers of the people who tried to change the world, but at the same time were trying to live their lives.

RC: Are you upset that we actually have it easier? That our life is a little more normalized?.

LM: Unfortunately, or fortunately, life is pretty easy from our point of view. But making art is not an easy thing.

RC: I would agree with that completely, making art has not changed at all in twenty thousand years.

LM: Yeah I think Duchamp said, or maybe it’s not what he said but what I remember he said, but making art is similar to playing chess with dead people. This is of course an outrageous quote, as he assumed everyone played chess.

## Conversation with Lior Modan

by Ryan Coffey & Ruslana Lichtzier,

Hosted by *Triumph*

RL: Lior, let’s go back to the information your work holds, that is being flattened into a surface, though there is also the behind the surface. I wonder how it is for people who don’t speak your language. And it’s not about Hebrew or English, but there is a language that you speak that is your own. I wonder how you think about the works having the danger of being opaque to certain people.

LM: I think the work avoids language, which might make it harder for some to access it. But at the same time there’s something about my recent work that is much friendlier; it really welcomes you, as long as you’re willing to leave words at the door while you’re taking your shoes off. It feels as if there’s more of a democratic structure in a way, where words are equal to colors, and forms are equal to images and experience. Real experiences share the same bed with wild speculations. If you’re willing to get on this train, you can have a lot of fun with the work. But some are not willing to leave words at the door... if you’re trying to force a reading, it may be really hard for you.

RC: Part of me sees in your work an infinite possibility, as if, none of it really matters - also I have Queen stuck in my head right now, so that might be part it. I see an odd random determinism to it. Anything could have happened, but then it landed into this position, which is one of the things I like the most about it. Nothing seems to be fixed. Some art smashes you in the face with its decision making.

LM: Yes, I think I’m the first one who’s is willing to give away everything I believe in to try something new. I think that this randomness you’re describing is me being really down to play. They are the moments I said “fuck it” and went for something else.

RC: That’s actually really funny because it couldn’t be more deterministic, you know? This isn’t my work, where there really is kind of a randomness to the line quality of things, because I don’t decide that. With yours, you have to set this shit up.

LM: Yes, this takes time. The randomness comes to be in the moments I decide to stop and start, or stop and almost start, and then it ends. It’s more about the end.

RC: Another thing I see in your work is that there’s a seething rage. The work has a calm quality, but I feel there’s another Lior inside there that’s saying “I will fuck this all up if... if I want to...”

RL: The first reaction to Lior’s work is “what the fuck.” The pieces are singular.

RC: I don’t feel that way at all.

RL: The works are all different scales, they’re completely different from each other. They are complete singularities.

LM: Someone told this to me once. The pieces are more like parts, or series, rather than a body of work. You can mix and match them.

RL: I remember during the closing event of your show at NURTURE Art, I repeatedly heard the question “Is this one artist?”. There is something very plural about the work. What I’m trying to say is that the idea of singularity is a consistent mark.

RC: I just don’t think in that way.

RL: That’s cool, how do you think about it?

RC: Well, I think about it as a dinner party, as if you are setting the table. A lot of these works could be on the floor, and I am saying that partially from seeing them on the floor in your studio. knowing that they’re built on the floor adds a kind of funny dynamism to the work. While building them you have to project on the floor how it will look on the wall, while both planes are fundamentally different. It creates a sort of flatness, similar to a floor, or a table.

RL: Or a horizontality.

LM: Yes, I do most of them on the floor, because a lot of them are actually sculptures in disguise, and It’s much easier to sculpt something on a stand or on a table. But between the different stages, each element goes through several processions. So between these stages and after being hung on the wall, I spend time with the work, and try to feel how it is to be in the same room with them.

RL: So you sit next to them and feel them?

LM: Yeah, because they change. If you hang out near a sleeping guy for two weeks and then he stands up, he will feel really different to you.

RL: Do you want your work to be awake?

LM: I want my work to be whatever it wants to be. I think that objects on the wall confront you in a different way than objects on a pedestal do. There's something much scarier and existentially confrontational about something that is popping out from the wall. I like that.

RC: There's a weird forced respectability to a painting. The pure form that you kind of unintentionally bow down to, whereas, sculpture is more human, it's relatable because it is in our physicality.

LM: Yeah, you relate to a sculpture in a similar way you relate to a human being or a dog, or a light bulb. Whereas with a painting you think "that's the end of the world, you can't go further than the painting."

RC: Do you know this artist Ron Gorchov?

LM: Yes, I like his work.

RC: I was his studio assistant for a couple months. He also forces the painting to be more of an object.

LM: He's one of the few artists that whenever I see an image of his work, I just really want to be there to smell it or to feel how it actually is in person.

RC: It smelled like cat piss. That's what his studio smelled like.

LM: That's fucking amazing.

RC: So this is a question I hate but, I'll ask it anyway. Is the work about something? Is it specific? Or is it about not about? Does it exist.

LM: Ok I'll answer the way you hate for people to answer. It's about so many things and it's also really specific.

RC: That's the best answer for that annoying question.

RC: I'm asking only because I feel that one of the similarities you and I have is the disagreement with specificity. Even the way we'll answer a question the way someone asks, it's always around the answer. This allows me, as a viewer to exist inside your work, rather than be forced to examine it on its terms. I get to take my own terms with your work.

LM: This is what I want you to do. I feel that the danger in being over-specific is of being condescending, as if what I have is more important than what you have, so you should acknowledge what I have and get it yourself.

RC: Completely. Who are you to tell the answers.

LM: Yeah, and why would you want to use an artwork to do that?

RC: That's one of my biggest complaints with the art world I grew up in, leave it in the goddamn book. If you want to tell me how it is, put it in the book.

LM: Yes, and books are great. I love reading books, my family has a publishing house. Art is not visual in the same way as books are. The duration of the feeling in art and its types of effects are deeper than in books. Books are visual, but they become visual only when you imagine them exactly the way you want. The way I relate to one book and how I imagine what I'm reading would be very different than how you perceive it.

RC: Also, a book is interactive. A painting, you don't open up a painting.

LM: Yes, and when you see a painting it's really easy to look away, or not be invested at all, and just move to the next one.

RL: Tell me about the relationship between the titles and the work.

LM: Hmm (giggle).

RL: I think that they work wonderfully as keys. "Hostility" is such a great title, also because it gives a tone to a painting that has a sense of humor. But then, with "Therese", for a person who doesn't know who she is, it's completely opaque.

LM: This thing with "Therese" started not with the painting, but with my cat. What an odd name to give to a cat. It started in relation to the little grey kitten. The titles are keys but they do not necessarily take you to the right door. "Hostility" does go to the right door, but it is one of the few occasions that the key does have a purpose, it needed to open this door, and

help this painting be what it actually is.

RC: Ruslana wrote something recently and all I could think about in relation to her text was Alice in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, because they never say anything straight. It was read to me as a child and I came back recently to it because of her text. It is an absolutely brilliant book; there is no direct answer, they are only talking around the subject.

RL: Ryan is bringing up Alice because the book is circular, which is one of the characteristics in your work that we share a love for. I connect this circularity with a plane of potentiality. It acts like an engine and not as an extension of you. Does that make sense?

LM: It completely makes sense. I think that there's no such thing as straight answers. Think of where we live, there's never actual answers, there's just bits of information that will make you feel comfort in the moment. The only real answers, the big answers that are out there, are the ones you can't really believe in. So, we can approach answers in a different way. Answers can help us not be stagnant. I think this is a more productive approach, because then we can cover more ground.

RC: Answers create world wars.

LM: Yes, when you want to use your answer and make everyone think the same answer.

RC: I suppose that's what I always loved in Buddhism, where everything is more of a question. It doesn't say "meditate and you shall feel enlightened," it is more, "do it and maybe something will happen."

RL: Lior, I'm curious about how you negotiate the spaces between the actual and the virtual and the material and digital in your production.

LM: Every time I tried to put a boundary on what I was doing, or when I tried to define why I'm doing it, it always proved to be wrong. Now whenever I have the instinct to go one way, I immediately go the other way too. It's all tied up together. It's hard for me to include one but not the other. I go back and forth and back and forth; and it's difficult to talk about the world of materials and images, analog and digital, as being together, but it's also difficult to separate them. At some point I realized I want to bring everything in.

RC: "Old Flower Man" includes ink jet print, resin, fabric, tin, silicone, mesh, acrylic... most artists would be talking about why is there an inkjet print, why is it not a painting, what are these materials. For some reason with your work I don't care. You used what you could use. It's refreshing that the conversation isn't about using an inkjet print.

RL: I remember when we were in Israel, you were talking a lot about Israeli art, and American art, and the fact that you are not an Israeli artist and you've never been an Israeli artist. Do you feel as though you have more sense of freedom being outside of Israel?

LM: I feel like there is always more freedom when you leave the place where you grew up. It doesn't matter if you grew up in Iowa, Israel or Paris, if you leave, you'll have more room.

RL: Do you still feel a connection to the place you came from.

LM: I never felt a connection.

RL: Do you feel a connection to the place that you're in?

LM: The place I am connected to, art wise, is New York, but I don't know why. I don't even know if New York is a place; it's an assembly of so many places coexisting together with components like money, ambitions and aspirations, but it's not a real place. Though still, I feel that my art belongs there.

RC: I feel like a New York scene is a dead concept. With the proliferation of imagery on the internet it's almost impossible to give a specific theme to New York. New York is more like the internet than a real place, you can exist more on the internet and not in the city.

RL: But every space has its own relationships, communities, people talking to other people, people going to each-others studios.

LM: Yes, but it's hard to know when the internet stops and when New York starts, or when New York stops and the internet continues; it's all enmeshed.

RC: That's one of things I love in Chicago and it's funny, you said there's a freedom in leaving home, but I came back home. And actually my work got much more free. There is a concreteness to this city, it exists as Chicago. It doesn't switch identities every other month.

RL: It's impossible for Chicago to switch its identity, it's too in love with its working class identity.

RC: There is absolutely nothing glamorous about this city.

RL: There's no deception about your dreams coming true. I think that's why so many people leave it; it's hard to be in a place that does not deceive you. It's ugly. Chicago is a grey, brown city and it does not try to hide it, so it's kind of hard to be here. I think that that is the difference. Chicago is not the internet.

RC: I'm going to ask another annoying question because you give good responses to them. Where do you see your work going?

LM: In what way?

RC: I mean, do you see in your future, young man, do you see sculpture again?

LM: I do, but I have no clue how they will look. I stopped making sculptures at some point because I just didn't have anything to make anymore. I'm sure when it will feel distant from me, it will become attractive again. But I'm constantly changing. I have no clue.

RC: So that belays the questions of whether you're satisfied with your work?

LM: I don't understand how to assign satisfaction to art. I think that the ratio between satisfaction and disappointment is pretty horrendous. Sometimes I'm satisfied with art, but I don't think anyone should live their life according to that ratio.

RC: The way I describe it is that I work and work and work, and finally I'll do a piece at the end of the night and be say "YES I did it!" And I'll be elated for 20 minutes maybe, and the next day I'll go back to the studio and see that it's a piece of shit. For me, the moment I complete something, I have to start over for another indeterminate amount of time, until I get to that 20 minutes again.

LM: And it's even stranger in the long run because the pieces that make you satisfied are the ones where it took you several months to decide what you think about them, as if your instincts are of no use in the situation.

RC: I often times feel the most satisfied when I'll go through old work; ten, twelve, fifteen years or older, and I go "oh shit I do know what I'm doing, I've always been doing this. I'm actually good at this thing." With newer work I'm thinking "what the fuck am I doing, am I any good at this?"

RL: Ryan and me were relating your work to freedom, that word really comes up.

RC: What? Apparently I don't agree with that anymore. I think your work has false freedom, it feels playful but there's a rage behind it.

LM: Yes, it's some sort of breeze of freedom.

RC: I think that a similar thing operates in my work, it seems playful but the work is of an angry man that makes calm gestures.

RL: Lior, do you feel that your work is also angry?

LM: I think it got less angry, and it's something I am sorry for. I feel that anger is a really great thing in an artwork.

RL: I agree. It's as if the work says "if you want to play, play by my rules first and then invent yours".

LM: For me it's different, for me it shows that there is a person behind it.

RC: Yes, the work is not here for a reason; a person made a thing, and now this thing is in front of you. This is one of the strongest points to me in your work. It exists, it's doesn't say "I exist," it's just there. Its existence is a given, it's more of a cup than a text book.

LM: It's great to hear this. I care about this exact thing, something in the core of it, when making art, to give it room to just be.

RC: I have a complete refutation of the idea of work being "about." I want it to just be, which relates to... I feel I'm always talking to dead people. I took a year off going to the studio because they wouldn't shut the fuck up.

LM: Which is kind of annoying how dead people don't shut the fuck up!

RC: The moment when maybe I died myself, I could resist them telling me what everything is. I could respond, "no no no no, it is this, come on guys. Let's sit down and talk about it, but stop telling me what the fuck it is." Then I started to feel like I could actually make artwork.

LM: Great, that makes complete sense. The extreme effort to become free in making is kind of hilarious, because making is the least free thing.

RC: Lior, what's the deal with the title of the show?

LM: Ah, the title is a painting.

RC: What?

LM: The title is its own little painting.

RC: Okay...

RL: I really like it. It totally makes sense. It brings in the idea of compression, and also similarities that are not similar and yet they are. It creates multiple images.

RC: So I have one more question - if the work operates in multiple places, do you see the title as a center? Almost like a pole... in terms of the earth poles. Do they need a title?

LM: You're talking about the title of the show, or all titles?

RC: I'm talking about each piece.

LM: I think it's a just another thing, similar to how some painters paint the sides of the painting? Then the title is like painting the wall near the painting; it's still part of the work but it depends on its specific relations to the work.

RL: As you said, it's a key to a door but not necessarily the right door.

LM: It could be though.

RL: Sometimes it is.

RC: I struggle with titles. Almost all of my shows I've ever done, every piece is untitled. Which really annoys gallerists.

RL: I think this expresses the potential of what you can do with language, while still asking for it to stay outside. It keeps coming back though.

RC: I suppose I respect language too much to put my stupid brain into it.

RL: You're such a liar. You love fucking with words. And when you do it, it is brilliant.

RC: The words should be appreciated for themselves rather than being put into an object.

RL: Oh got it. There's no about, there's no about, there's no about.

LM: Human beings have a really weird habit of wanting to accord their objects with words.